

Workshops to Develop a Strategic Research and Education Initiative for
Innovative Integrated Pest Management Practices in Southern Sweetpotato
Production Systems

Final Report
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via email to

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Objectives

In August of 2001, U.S. EPA's Region 4 funded a series of workshops, led by NC State's Department of Horticultural Science, to assist the southern sweetpotato industry in developing a strategic IPM research and education plan. The original proposal outlined three major objectives. These were to:

1. Develop a collaborative multi-stakeholder strategic initiative for innovative Integrated Pest Management (IPM) research and education that enables the southern sweetpotato industry to cost-effectively reduce reliance on FQPA-targeted materials.
2. Apply lessons learned from the FQPA transition experiences of the Wisconsin Irish potato industry to the sweetpotato industry to identify potentially applicable reduced-risk tools, and foster effective communication, education and organizing strategies.
3. Build a communications infrastructure to support the strategic planning and organizational process.

Progress

The strategic planning workshops are now complete and four copies of the final strategic plan are attached. The strategic plan describes the pest management challenges faced by the sweetpotato industry and recommends a series of goals, strategies and activities for addressing gaps in pest management research and education. The plan highlights critical research needs, including the identification of:

- causal factors associated with insect damage,
- insect monitoring and scouting techniques,
- interactions between weed populations and insect damage,
- the etiology of post-harvest root damage,

- reduced-risk disease management tools,
- techniques for enhancing the health of propagation materials,
- growers' priority weed problems,
- weed-free periods or density thresholds to minimize herbicide use, and
- sweetpotato varieties resistant to diseases, insects and weed competition.

The plan calls for the evaluation of alternative, preferably reduced-risk chemical and non-chemical control strategies, where feasible, for insects, weeds and diseases. The plan also focuses on developing educational tools which help growers minimize prophylactic pesticide applications and reduce costs.

Copies of the plan will be distributed to all workshop participants and forwarded to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Regional Pest Management Centers for approval and to be included on their searchable database and website.

Evaluation

A total of 26 people participated in the strategic planning workshops although no workshop was ever attended by all 26 participants. A survey was distributed to the 13 participants attending the final workshop December 19th, 2002. The survey asked participants to evaluate the strategic plan and the process used to develop the strategic plan. It further asked for recommendations for how the plan and the planning process could have been improved. The following summarizes the results of the evaluation survey:

- 100 % of respondents strongly agree that the strategic plan includes high priority research and education objectives.
- 92 % of respondents strongly agree that if strategic plan were funded and implemented, the sweetpotato industry would benefit greatly.
- 61 % will utilize all or parts of the strategic plan in their work.
- 69 % believe the workshops were necessary in order to develop the strategic plan.
- 69 % are glad they took the time to participate in the workshops.
- 69 % believe that the appropriate participants were included in the workshops.
- 69 % believe that the workshops were well facilitated.
- 53 % believe that communication between workshops was well coordinated.
- 84 % felt included in all strategic planning communications.

Some of the recommendations for how the strategic plan could be improved include:

- Review it periodically over time.
- Keep it a working document.
- Immediate publication and distribution to universities and granting agencies.
- Get review from all participants.

Some of the recommendations for how the planning process could be improved include:

- Exchange existing information in advance or at meetings.
- Less time on process of getting to know each other & “feel-good” exercises and more time on business.
- Less structure with additional time for discussions within groups, since those discussions require considerable time to bring all participants up to the same level of understanding.
- Develop subgroups to continue more in-depth planning later.
- Have more meetings with the entire group, if funding is available.
- Have more “average” growers participate.
- Central committee that can make decisions for the group.

All in all, we believe the planning process was extremely useful and that the product we developed will be put to good use. Already, most of the researchers and growers involved in this process have developed a grant proposal that was submitted to USDA’s Risk Avoidance and Mitigation Program (RAMP). The proposal is a direct outgrowth of the strategic planning process and it articulates a multi-state, multi-disciplinary research and grower education project that will provide growers with much of the IPM information they currently lack. If funding is forthcoming, we expect to begin following through on some of the high priority research and education activities identified as necessary in this strategic plan.